

1945

The Little Professor of Piney Woods from The Reader's Digest

Nelson Antrim Crawford (b. 1888)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/pineywoods>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crawford (b. 1888), Nelson Antrim, "The Little Professor of Piney Woods from The Reader's Digest" (1945). *Piney Woods School Collection*. 53.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/pineywoods/53>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the General Special Collections at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Piney Woods School Collection by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

VOLUME XLVII

The Reader's Digest

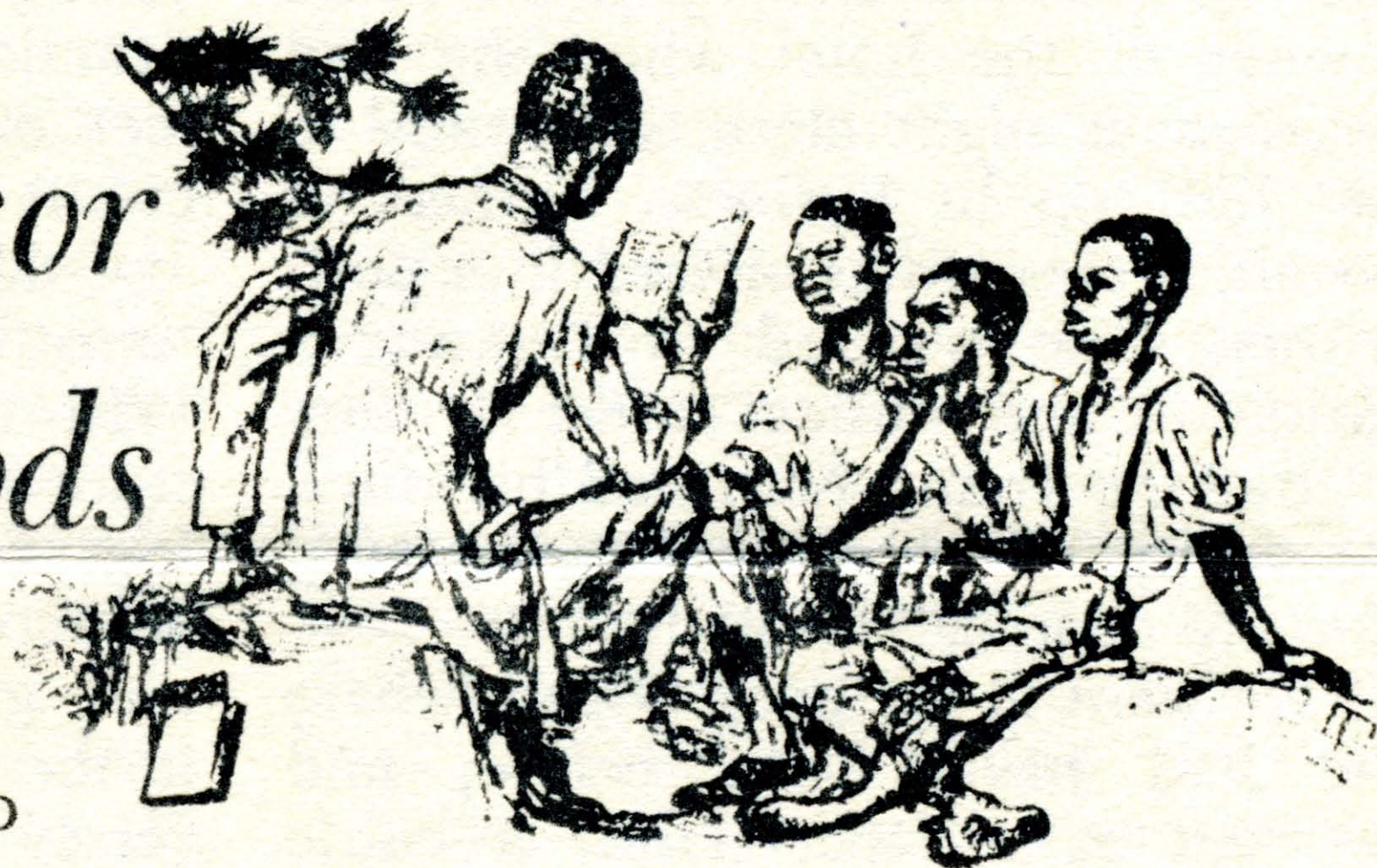
An article a day of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form



Humbly starting with \$1.65 and a vision, Laurence Clifton Jones has enriched the lives of thousands of Negroes

The Little Professor of Piney Woods

Condensed from *The Rotarian*
NELSON ANTRIM CRAWFORD



A HUSKY black boy of 13 lifted a gunny sack to the top of the teacher's desk. Behind the desk the short, scholarly-looking Negro glanced up.

"What is it, son?" he asked with a smile.

"Sweet 'taters — they's all Ah got," answered the boy. "Pappy says Ah needn't to come here without no money, but preachah says you'd take me. Ah'll wuhk hahd to learn things." He wriggled his bare toes in an agony of uncertainty.

"Of course I'll take you," said the teacher. "Nobody's ever been turned away from Piney Woods School because he hadn't any money."

Today, grown to manhood, that boy, R. P. McGhee, is head of the manual-training department in a Mississippi Negro high school. "I'd be an ignorant field hand if it hadn't been for the Little Professor of Piney Woods — and so would a lot of the boys I've taught," says McGhee. "He taught me to do things. What's

more, he inspired me to help other people do things."

"The Little Professor" is Laurence Clifton Jones, Missouri-born, northern-educated Negro, who turned his back on good jobs and comfortable living to bring practical education and opportunity to members of his race in the most backward region he could find. In 1909 he founded Piney Woods Country Life School, near Jackson, Miss., on a pine stump with three illiterate pupils and \$1.65 cash. The school now has a \$250,000 plant, 1700 acres of well-tended land, and an enrollment of 440 pupils ranging in age from six to 40, drawn from 15 states and one foreign country. It has sent out to rural communities thousands of trained farmers, mechanics and housekeepers and hundreds of practical, competent teachers. In addition it has carried the gospel of good farming, healthful homemaking, sensible religion and stimulating social life to Negroes for miles around.

The only Negro in his class, at

the University of Iowa, Laurence Jones was a favorite of faculty and students because of his musical and dramatic talent, his scholastic ability and his sterling character. When he was graduated in 1907, the white owner of the hotel where he had worked as night clerk was ready to set him up in business. Fathers of wealthy classmates offered him positions. One wanted to finance a dramatic and musical career for him.

But the young man had his mind made up. "I want to do something for my people," he said.

He went to the deep South, where he had never been before, and worked as a farm hand, a cattle herder, a porter. In the heart of the piney woods, 25 miles south of Jackson, he found hundreds of blacks who sharecropped cotton, watched over a few razorback hogs, drank corn liquor hot from the still. They were 80 percent illiterate.

Here Jones started teaching, his pupils three illiterate boys. He made his living picking cotton and peas and cutting hay. When he tried to interest Negroes in the region he met suspicion and misunderstanding. They didn't want education, especially from a "furriner." Within three months, however, his pupils showed off their newly acquired learning so well that he had 29 students. A well-to-do Negro in the community donated a tumble-down cabin and 40 acres of land. Jones and his pupils fixed up the old cabin for a schoolhouse and living quarters for himself. The county board of education appropriated \$18 a month.

As the school grew, another build-

ing was needed. Jones approached a wealthy white mill owner, who listened to his story and said: "I've always claimed it was plumb silly to try to educate these Negroes. But, young man, you've got guts and a practical idea. I'll give you 10,000 feet of lumber, and you can have credit for any more you need."

Other white men made contributions. The Negroes gave their mites. With their own hands Jones and his students put up a substantial building. Enrollment leaped to 85. The 40-acre tract was planted to corn and garden truck. When a white farmer gave the school a Duroc-Jersey sow that was about to farrow, the professor and his pupils built a hog-tight fence—a lesson to a community where swine were allowed to run wild. Jones was soon able to devote the arithmetic lessons to figuring profits from good crops and well-cared-for livestock, and the English classes to essays about sound farming.

Then one day two brothers, who were members of the college fraternity where Jones had waited on table, paid a surprise visit. "I made up my mind to ask for \$100," Jones says, "but before I could get my courage up, one of them said, 'We own 800 acres near your school. If you want that land, it's yours.'"

A local family started a fine herd of purebred Ayrshires for the school, and a retired businessman whose hobby was orcharding gave 500 fruit and pecan trees. More gifts arrived daily—clothing which the students made over, bedding, old furniture, a plow.

Money came in, too, but not fast

enough. Jones organized a group of singers from the student body, built a makeshift bus on an old chassis, and took them over the country giving concerts. At Marshalltown, Iowa, where he had grown up, the Rotary Club sponsored a concert and cleared \$1000 for the school. Jones wrote a song, "Sweet Memories of Dixie," which brought in enough money to provide for 40 penniless boys and girls. He gave Chautauqua lectures, and organized a semipro baseball team that earned money for Piney Woods by playing in many communities.

Now, in addition to a fine farm which produces 60 percent of the food consumed by the students, the school has five handsome brick buildings and 20 frame structures. Students made the brick, cut the lumber and put up the buildings.

From the beginning Jones's formula has been: Teach boys and girls how to work with their hands so they will be able to make a living, academic subjects to make them articulate and adjusted to American culture, and sane moral and religious training as a substitute for superstition and fear. Today 30 teachers, mostly Negro, offer first-class vocational training in agriculture, carpentry, plumbing and steamfitting, auto mechanics, masonry, printing, cooking, sewing, laundry work, book-keeping, stenography. Every student must learn at least two trades, so that if work is scarce in one he can turn to the other. Courses range from primary grades through junior college.

The students learn by doing. They milk 50 cows daily, learn modern farm methods such as ter-

racing and contour plowing, and experiment in growing tung trees and kudzu. From the school garden they put up 15,000 quarts of fruit and vegetables each year. The girls make out menus, cook and serve the meals.

On a press obtained for the school by C. W. Winn, the white publisher of the Brandon (Miss.) *News*, students in printing get out two papers, one for themselves, one for distribution to friends of the school. There is no piece of machinery on the campus that students in mechanics cannot repair. Piney Woods boys can roof a building or grind a valve, build a kitchen cabinet or weld a broken iron rod.

A blind colored girl who had formerly begged for a living learned chair caning at Piney Woods. Other blind children followed her example. One of the teachers studied Braille. Now there are 26 blind students. Every blind boy or girl who has gone out from the school is self-supporting.

Seriously crippled children are also trained at the school. Beatrice Price, crippled by infantile paralysis, became an expert seamstress. John Gilmore, legless, is now telephone supervisor in a New Orleans factory.

Commencement exercises at Piney Woods are like those in no other school in America. For example, Milton Weathersby, valedictorian of the Class of 1945, spoke for three minutes of Negro opportunities, then took off his dark-blue cap and gown and stood in overalls. "Bring in the pig," he called out.

Two colored youngsters brought in a young Duroc-Jersey and laid

it on a table. "I am going to demonstrate how to vaccinate against hog cholera," Weathersby said. As he explained the process and its scientific basis, he took a syringe and plunged the needle into the pig's shoulder so skillfully that the animal made no sound.

Lenora Collins, salutatorian, laundered and ironed a blouse that would have taxed the skill of an expert. Gertrude Adams canned a mess of beans in a modern pressure cooker, while Epsy Jane Johnson canned tomatoes by the hot-water-bath method. A group of girls exhibited a luncheon set made from flour sacks, sheets made from bleached feed bags. Every one of the 27 graduates presented something that could be used to improve the life of the vast Negro population of the region.

Piney Woods has never departed from its original ideal of education for poor children. If a boy or girl can pay, the charge, including board and room, is \$20 a month. Most of the students pay what they can and earn the rest of their way by working.

Through the extension department of the school — reaching 15,000 Negroes annually — and the influence of its graduates, three fourths of the colored farmers in two adjacent counties own land, as against less than five percent when Piney Woods was started. Twenty home-economics graduates are now house-

keepers for well-to-do families, at \$75 to \$175 a month. Others teach in 26 states.

Georgie L. Myers, a member of the first graduating class, started teaching a one-room country school. She and her pupils gave entertainments, made and sold candy, picked peas, begged contributions, and erected a three-room schoolhouse costing \$2500. She repeated this achievement in two other communities. The counties, seeing what she had done, furnished funds to maintain the schools adequately.

Bettye Mae Jack, graduate of Piney Woods and of the University of Chicago, has for eight years been supervisor of three Negro high schools and 46 grade schools in Scott County, Mississippi.

Small wonder that Piney Woods has won the continued confidence and support of white and Negro alike. And small wonder that Laurence Clifton Jones is called "one of the first citizens of Mississippi" by Dr. J. S. Vandiver, state superintendent of public instruction.

I asked the Little Professor how he managed to persevere through the long years of his early struggles. He smiled.

"I just kept on praying as if everything depended on God, and kept on working as if everything depended on me. You can't get discouraged if you do that."

